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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: CHANGED US WORDING ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT
THREATENS BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

REF: A. BAKU 486

[1](#)B. BAKU 465

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action request; see paras 5-7.

[1](#)2. (C) For senior Azerbaijani officials -- and particularly President Aliyev -- the USG's decision to change the language on Nagorno-Karabakh in the 2006 Armenia Human Rights Report after publication, coupled with press reports that we did so in response to Armenian pressure, represents a fundamental weakening in US policy on this crucial point and has affected their view of the US as an honest broker in the Minsk process. If we do not address the situation effectively, it will have negative, potentially long-lasting implications for the bilateral relationship. Azerbaijani officials, including President Aliyev, have repeatedly told us that the US is the only power that can guarantee Azerbaijan's independence and sovereignty. The Government of Azerbaijan's faith is based, in large part, on the United States' role as a Co-Chair in the Minsk Group process, where it is the sole power capable of standing up to what the Azerbaijanis perceive as continual Russian influence in the peace process in favor of Armenia. The GOAJ both privately and now publicly, in an April 22 MFA statement, has told us that the post-publication revisions to the Armenia Human Rights Report on the most sensitive aspect of their top policy issue have put in doubt the US Government's position as an "honest broker" in the conflict. (Full text of MFA statement in para 8.) The Azerbaijan media has reported extensively on this issue, citing it as "proof" of a pro-Armenian bias on the part of the US Government (media reaction septel). Statements from Armenian sources reinforce that impression.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Azerbaijan's shaken confidence that the US is no longer an "honest broker" in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a fundamental change in the relationship that threatens to jeopardize key US interests. As we consider asking Azerbaijan to take serious steps on difficult domestic reforms and on new bilateral initiatives in areas ranging from Iran to Missile Defense, it is vital that we maintain the trust and credibility that we have built so carefully over time. The Azerbaijani Government views the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as its primary domestic and foreign policy concern; as stated privately and in the April 22 MFA statement, the Azerbaijani Government will be unwilling to enter into new security cooperation with the United States if we are seen as less than even-handed in our dealings on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The GOAJ, which fully recognizes

the important role the US plays in defending Azerbaijan's sovereignty vis-a-vis Russia and Iran, did not take lightly the decision to postpone the April 23 security talks. Just last week, President Aliyev told the Ambassador that he believed the April 23 talks could "do a lot" to improve its position with respect to its two more powerful neighbors; his officials, the broadest and most senior delegation ever sent to the talks with representatives from every power ministry, were instructed to come to Washington with very specific proposals (ref b). Aliyev recognizes he has a lot to lose by postponing the talks, and his decision to postpone them should be viewed as a sign of the gravity he attaches to the revised Human Rights Report language.

¶4. (C) Azerbaijan's strong reaction to the Human Rights Report revisions is not petulance or an attempt to gain advantages in the ongoing Minsk Group negotiations. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict defines Azerbaijan's foreign policy and domestic politics; it is the barometer by which Ilham Aliyev -- like his father before him -- defines his own legitimacy as a leader, both domestically and abroad. Aliyev feels personally betrayed by the post-publication revisions to the Human Rights Report. As Foreign Minister Mammadyarov told the Ambassador, Aliyev feels that the revisions are a betrayal of the serious concessions he has made in the peace process; in Aliyev's view, they also call into doubt US commitments made as part of the peace process. We should not underestimate the effects of the erosion of personal trust on the part of the Azerbaijani leadership. In the Caucasus, much depends on personal relationships and personal trust. Aliyev's feelings of personal betrayal are a serious setback to our ability to advance US objectives.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

¶5. (C) Immediate, decisive action is required now to stem further deterioration in the bilateral relationship. We will have to work assiduously over the coming weeks and months to repair the damage from this blow and ensure continued progress on US objectives in security, energy, and reform. A strong public and private response is needed. As a first step, we urge the Department to consider a strongly worded statement from the podium, affirming the US Government's support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, including Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven occupied territories (suggested language in para 7). We also recommend that DAS Bryza conduct as soon as possible an interview with ANS Television, in which he can explain, as Minsk Group Co-Chair,

US policy and affirm our support for Azerbaijan's independence, sovereignty and territorial action.

¶6. (C) Given the strong role that personal relationships play in the Caucasus, it is equally important that a senior USG official personally assure President Aliyev that the Human Rights Report language does not constitute a change in our policy toward Azerbaijan. Given the positive, recent exchange of letters between the Secretary and President Aliyev, we believe that a short phone call from the Secretary to President Aliyev to express our understanding of how strongly Azerbaijan views this issue could help reaffirm our commitment to Azerbaijan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Nagorno-Karabakh. However, regardless of our immediate steps to repair the relationship, the revised NK language in the Armenia Human Rights Report will continue to haunt the Azerbaijan Government as evidence of alleged US susceptibility to political pressure and a perceived tilt in US policy. We will need continued, affirmative, high-level engagement to show Azerbaijan the benefits of continued engagement and rebuild the relationship.

¶7. (SBU) Suggested language for the proposed statement by the Spokesperson:

- The revised language in the 2006 Armenia Human Rights Report does not signal a change in US policy.

- There is no implication in the new Human Rights Report language of a change in US policy. Any statements to the contrary are incorrect.

- The United States recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, including Nagorno Karabakh and the Occupied Territories. We have never considered Nagorno-Karabakh anything other than Azerbaijani territory.

- We understand how deeply sensitive this issue is to the Azerbaijani government and people.

18. (U) On April 22, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the changes to the 2006 Armenia Report on Human Rights Practices. The full text of English-language version of the MFA's statement follows:

Taking into consideration changes to the provisions on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno Karabakh conflict in the initial 2006 State Department Country Reports Practices, Azerbaijani Government postponed the visit of the Azerbaijani delegation to Washington for the bilateral security talks, scheduled for April 23-24. The delegation was to include high level officials from Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Emergencies, Ministry of National Security, Interior Ministry, Border Service, Customs Committee, and Special Protection Service.

Resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno Karabakh conflict based on the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, with Nagorno Karabakh as its inalienable part, is a primary and foremost element for our country in the broad-format Azerbaijan-US security cooperation.

Introduction of the changes into the already published report, which distort the essence of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno Karabakh conflict, confuses and puts in doubt the US position of the "honest broker" in the resolution of the conflict.

Such a step may become a serious impediment to further security-related cooperation between our countries. (End text of MFA statement)

DERSE